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PIONEER DAYS IN COLES COUNTY, ILLINOIS.

BY MRS. JOSEPH C. DOLE.

History has aptly been called the camera through which we may view the events of countries and of peoples. The noble deeds of the soldiers and statesmen are recorded to stand as a monument to them and as an illustrious example for our emulation.

The events of history in general, then, are of greatest interest to us who come after. But of how much more value to us are the events which constitute the annals of our own home county and immediate ancestors! A history of Coles County is a part of the history of America. Local intelligence, wealth, prosperity make up a part of our national wealth and material greatness. The patriotism and self-sacrifice of our pioneers, the bravery and prowess of our soldiers, the high character of our statesmen are no small part of the pride and glory of our nation. In order to understand this period it is necessary to turn back the pages of the history of our County to the very first records that are known and also to study the geography of this section. The present territory of our county was formerly a part of the State of Virginia, under the Royal Charter "From sea to sea" grants. Virginia in 1784 ceded this territory to the United States and this region was called the North West Territory. Thus Coles County comes of noble ancestry. When Ohio became a state Illinois was made a part of Indiana Territory, and in 1809 the tract of land comprising the present State of Illinois was organized into a separate territory. It was composed at that time of two counties, St. Clair and Randolph. Shortly afterwards Madison County was set off from St. Clair and Crawford County set off from Madison. By the time Illinois was received into statehood—1818—there were fifteen counties. Crawford County was named for William H. Crawford,

Secretary of the Treasury under Madison and Monroe; He was an honest man. Later he was a candidate for the presidency in 1824 when Jackson was elected. In 1819, the year following Illinois' admission to statehood, Clark County was formed. It was named in honor of George Rogers Clark, a native of Virginia and a famous pioneer warrior. About twenty-five years before Illinois was organized into a territory, Clark performed a great service to the civilization of the central west. A greater achievement than was that of Napoleon leading a great army across the Alps, which was so applauded by the world! Clark organized an army, all on his own initiative, and, with practically no funds, marched across the Alleghany Mountains which were then the barrier that protected the Atlantic colonies from the terrors of the Indians and French and later the English. He had never seen a steamboat nor heard of the railway train but he did understand war and the transportation of an army, so he built rafts and on them came down the Ohio to where Shawneetown, Illinois now stands, then by difficult marches through swamps and marshes, across country to Kaskaskia on the Mississippi River and captured that important post from the British. Then he marched across the barren, marshy prairie to Vincennes, which he captured from the British, again, thus changing the ownership of all this territory in which lie our state and our county. Coles County was set off from Clark County in 1830. It embraced in its territory then what is now Cumberland and Douglas as well. It was named in honor of Edward Coles, second governor of the state, elected in 1822. As a general rule, it is said not to be safe to name a child or a county for any man yet living, even though he may be as wise as the sages, for one knows not how soon he may fall. But in the case of Coles County's name sake, he died with a name untarnished, a name fit to give to any county. He was a native of Virginia and a large slave owner. When he came to Illinois he brought his slaves with him. Because he loved liberty he set them all free when he arrived here and gave to each head of a family one hundred and sixty acres of land, thus complying with the law at that time that a freed-man must be self-supporting. The former owner also gave bond that the ex-slave would never become a public charge. To this last

wholly unreasonable and impossible requirement, Mr. Coles would not agree, so he was fined \$2,000.00, but was never forced to pay it. By his action regarding slavery he shaped the destiny of our state in the matter of whether it should be free or slave. Coles County when organized in 1830, was twenty-eight miles east and west and about fifty miles north and south. At present it is bounded on the north by Douglas, on the west by Shelby and Moultrie, on the south by Cumberland and on the east by Clark and Edgar.

When Coles County was set off from Clark the latter was unwilling to give up a certain portion of its county and inhabitants to the new county, and a settlement of energetic and progressive people; this accounts for the "jog" in the southeast corner of the county. In the northeast corner of the county there is another "jog," which was made to retain the village of Oakland, in Coles County, when Douglas was formed. This village was regarded as having a splendid outlook for growth and development so Coles County was unwilling to give it up and the people of Oakland were unwilling to cast in their lot with the new county.

Treating Coles County from a geographical standpoint, it is situated in latitude 40 north and in longitude 11 west from Washington and embraces about five hundred square miles. Its surface is gently rolling forming a beautiful plateau about 800 feet above the gulf of Mexico. It is largely prairie and constitutes a part of what is known as the Grand Prairie, one of the richest sections in the Mississippi Valley. The origin of our prairie land has been the source of much research. One theory is that the soil resulted from the decomposition of vegetable matter under water together with the fact that conditions here were not favorable to the growth of timber. At the close of the glacial period in the earth's formation, the most southern edge of the glacier came to just about the middle of the county and when the glacier began to melt and recede it left a rich residue of alluvial soil. This accounts for the different soil in the south and southeast part of the county. An immense amount of water was left on the soil when the glacier melted and although the draining of this county has gone on continuously since by means of our streams, evaporation and seepage into the soil, as well as by

artificial systems of drainage, our county is yet far from being sufficiently well and evenly drained for the growing of the largest possible crops. The soil of our prairie land is deep, rich and productive on which the original prairie grass grew very rank, higher than a man's head. As a rule the prairie occupied the higher ground and the timber, the low land along the streams, although there are exceptions to this. The varieties of timber are numerous, all kinds of oak, walnut, birch, elm, sugar trees, cottonwood and hackberry.

Speaking of sugar trees I would like to quote a stanza found in Davidson's old history of Illinois:

"The timber here is very good,
The forest trees are sturdy wood,
The maple trees its sweets affords,
The walnut, it is sawed in boards,
The giant oak the axman hails,
Its massive trunk is turned to rails,
And game is plenty in the State
Which makes the hunter's chances great,
The prairie wolf infests the land
And the wild cats all bristling stand."

In settling this country timber was regarded as a very important possession, so every settler bought a portion of timber land, although often times it was far removed from his prairie farm home. At one time timber land sold for more than prairie land.

There are but two streams large enough to be called rivers in this portion of the country, namely the Embarrass and the Kaskaskia. The latter is known in this section as the Okaw because the early French settlers, who gave it the name of Kaskaskia, very early began to shorten it to "Kas", pronounced "Kaw", and, after the French habit, they prefixed the article "Au", so it became "Au Kas" and the later American settlers naturally spelled it "Okaw". A coincidence is that the Ambraw, the American pronunciation of the French, "Embarrass," enters the Wabash River near Vincennes, which was captured by General Clark and the Okaw flows into the Mississippi near the old trading post of Kaskaskia, which

was also taken by General Clark. The Ambraw rises in Champaign County and flows through Douglas and Coles forming the dividing line in Coles County between Morgan and Oakland, Charleston and Ashmore townships and Pleasant Grove and Hutton Townships.

Before the days of railways, an old statute of Illinois declared the Ambraw navigable and numerous vessels were built at Blakman's Mill just south of Charleston. They were freight boats and carried the surplus products of the country to the New Orleans market. All kinds of fish abound in the Ambraw River. The Okaw flows through Okaw Township in the northeast part of the county. It too was lawfully navigable in the pioneer period but it was, and is, a dull, sluggish and muddy stream. There are two other streams not large enough to be called rivers which have their source within the county, namely: the Little Wabash and the Kickapoo, both named with Indian names. They begin near each other but the Wabash flows southwest and the Kickapoo east. There is also a small creek in Morgan township called Greasy Creek, getting its name in a notorious fashion. In pioneer days, hogs were allowed to run in the timber to fatten on the oak mast and many were stolen and butchered although before turning the hogs out in the open, the owners gave them certain ear marks to identify them. So when they were stolen and butchered, the thieves destroyed the heads by throwing them into this creek. On one occasion a band of these pioneer pork packers were overtaken at work scalding them in order to remove the hair but strange to say, all the hogs had first been decapitated! To explain this unusual proceeding they said "they never could get a good scald on a hog while his head was on". This became a local saying to typify a crooked deal of any kind.

In Ashmore Township is another small stream which was named as a result of circumstances. A new comer in the neighborhood had an encounter with a certain kind of cat which lived in great numbers along this creek and this man was so overwhelmed with the success of the little animal's defense that he buried his clothes on the battle ground and christened the creek by the name of the Pole Cat.

In this county there are numerous groves separated from the main timber. What circumstances gave rise to their growth and how long they have been growing, is not known. Dodge Grove in Mattoon Township, about two miles north of the City, takes its name from the following legend: There was a family named Whitley living near it who owned a race mare named "Dodge Filly". They took her to Springfield once, and having no money, staked the filly herself on the race and lost. They did not want to give her up so they brought her home secretly and hid her in this grove and although her new owners and the officers of the law searched for her they did not find her. Hence the name of the grove. Deadman's Grove is in Lafayette Township on the north branch of Kickapoo, took its name from the fact that a man named Coffman, living in the neighborhood, was found frozen to death in it in March, 1826. The corpse was found sitting at the base of a tree with his horse's bridle thrown over the shoulder. Samuel Kellogg is reported to have carried the body on horse back without coffin or escort to the Parker settlement on the Ambraw, south of Charleston, for inquest and burial.

Seven miles northwest of Charleston in Seven Hickory Township standing out in the open prairie, were seven hickory trees. This was very unusual because the hickory tree was not elsewhere found on the open prairie. The original trees long since have gone but a numerous progeny remain.

In Humboldt Township near the village of Humboldt there is a small stream called Flat Branch. This was formerly a camping ground of the Indians and their ponies ate the prairie grass, allowing the blue grass to spring up in its place. This then became the first blue grass patch in the county, and the grove there was so named "Blue Brass".

The Dry Grove is about four miles south of Mattoon and has borne that name from time immemorial. It is supposed to have been named by the first settler in a dry season. Buck Grove near Dry Grove gained its name from the numerous deer killed by the pioneers in this vicinity.

In the southern part of the county in Pleasant Grove Township is a tract called Goose Nest Prairie. About 1827 a person named Jonah Marshall, seeing this fertile and at-

tractive region for the first time and probably thinking of the peculiar richness of a goose's egg exclaimed in an up-lifted voice "This is the very goose nest". Just west is a point of timber known as Muddy Point, so called for its mud. Another prairie is Parker's Prairie in the east part south of Charleston, named after George Parker its original settler.

Prior to 1824 what is now known as Coles County was a wilderness uninhabited by civilized men. In 1824 the first settlement was made in the county by some pioneers from Crawford County on the Wabash where they had lived many years building forts, living in them and fighting the Indians. They were John Parker and his five sons and their families and Samuel Kellogg and his wife Mary, in all fourteen persons. They were from Tennessee originally and of the sturdiest pioneer stock. The first house in Coles County was built by Benjamin Parker on the east bank of the Ambraw just east of and opposite the place where Blakman's mill was in what is now Hutton Township. It was a rude affair but nevertheless sufficient to turn the rain, break the force of the sun's burning rays and resist the chilling blasts of winter. It consisted of a parlor, dining room and kitchen, and bedrooms sufficient for fourteen persons. The walls were of unhewn logs, the roof was made of clapboards weighted with poles instead of being nailed, the chimney was made of mud and sticks, the floor of puncheons neither hewn nor planed. The help to raise this cabin came from their old home in Crawford County, sixty miles away. They made it a social gathering and the women had a quilting at the same time. In the afternoon the men engaged in wrestling and other athletic sports. John Parker the ancestor of all these Parkers was a soldier in the Revolution as were almost all of the settlers and their immediate ancestors. In the Fall of 1824 Seth Bates and his sons and step sons, Levi and Samuel Doty, came to Coles County and settled the next Spring in what is now Lafayette Township, on the Kickapoo. Others came and started a mill and a tan yard there. Samuel Frost came to this settlement soon after and was the first merchant in the county and also carried the first mail through the county from Paris to Vandalia. There was an old trail leading from

Paris north to Danville and north from there to Detroit and on the south, as far as Vandalia, thus passing through Coles County where the state road now runs. In 1825 the present township of Ashmore was settled by the Dudley family who traced their line of ancestry back to Robert Dudley, Earl of Lester who figured conspicuously during the reign of Queen Elizabeth of England.

In what is now Pleasant Grove Township, the first settlement was made in 1829, on Goose Nest Prairie. Reverend Daniel Barham and sons with Thomas Barker put up the first cabin. What is now Morgan Township was not settled until 1830 when three families, the McAllisters, Clarks and Campbell, made a settlement on the west side of the Ambraw near Greasy Creek. These families had to go over into Edgar County to mill and to send their children to school. Mrs. Clark once spent eight weeks alone in her home during the winter of 1830 with six small children, among the wolves and panthers, while her husband went east to the settlements for provisions.

The territory now embraced in Oakland Township was settled first in 1829 by Samuel Ashmore, the Winklers and Hoskins families coming with him and making a settlement on Brushy Fork. At this time this was the only place in the county where the Indians had a village or trading post, but they and the white settlers are reported to have all lived in harmony together.

The first settlement in what is now Charleston Township, was made in 1826 by Enoch Glassco and sons and J. Y. Brown. They settled about a mile north of the present City of Charleston. The next year the Parkers came from their settlement on the Ambraw and settled on what is now part of the City of Charleston. Charles Morton came to this settlement about this time and first had a mill, but later opened a store and became the most enterprising merchant of the county. He lived on what is now the Decker farm and the settlement at Charleston was named for him. Hutton Township was settled in 1824 or 1825 by John Hutton. In 1826 a settlement was made by some of the Parkers on what is now known as Parker's Prairie south of Charleston. Some time in the year

1826 a settlement was made at Wabash point in the present township of Paradise. The first white settler was Daniel Drake, the next were the Hart family. In this Wabash Point settlement they were a law unto themselves and they tolerated no disorder in their midst. When anyone committed a misdemeanor, they organized a court and tried the culprit, a jury rendered a verdict and the punishment was carried out. On one occasion a man was caught trying to steal another's cowhide and potatoes; a court was at once organized with Thomas Hart as Judge, Silas Hart, attorney for the defendant and William Higgins and others, jurors. The trial resulted in a verdict of guilty and the punishment was fixed at twenty-nine lashes and banishment from the settlement and it was carried out. In 1826 Charles Sawyer, a native of Kentucky, made the first settlement in the southern part of what is now Mattoon Township. He came first to the home of the True family, who lived in what is now Lafayette Township, looked about him for a suitable place to settle and selected a place on the Little Wabash on the north side of the timber. He hired a man named Bates from the True Settlement to build a cabin for him while he returned to Kentucky for his family. This cabin was the first white man's house built within the bounds of either Mattoon or Paradise Townships. His brother, John Sawyer, came the next year and their cabins both stood in Section Twenty-eight of Mattoon Township.

The home and vicinity of Charles Sawyer was the center of the settlement. It was the camping ground for all comers until they could build a cabin for themselves. He was the friend of all who came, a devout earnest Christian, a Methodist and was the first to aid in planting that church at this settlement. The next year James Graham and family came and located a little east of Charles Sawyer. Mr. Graham was the local Methodist preacher of commendable zeal and an earnest christian man being widely known as one of the most able of the pioneer ministers of the west side of our county. Soon after, Elisha Linder came from Kentucky with his mother, two sisters and one brother and settled south of and adjoining Charles Sawyer and Reverend Graham. Later, in 1832, came the Langstons, the Morrisces and Richard Champion, who settled just west of the first settlement.

North Okaw Township located in the extreme northwest corner of the county was much larger than it is at present, extending to the north in Douglas County. Later it was divided into north and south Okaw and what we know as North Okaw was then the south half of the county. North Okaw received its name from the river flowing through it. The name "Martin", was first suggested, after one of the early settlers but "Okaw" was decided upon. The Okaw River, with its tributaries, forms excellent drainage and is bounded with timber which in early days extended southward from the river over fully one-third of the township. The other two-thirds to the south is a rich prairie land, deep black loam. A few settlements were made along the river in the timber as early as 1833 but the prairie land in the south two-thirds of the county was not settled until the great influx of population came with the railroad twenty years later. John Whitley with his four sons are recorded as among the first, if not the first, settlers that settled near the southwest limits of the township, on the Okaw. They came from Tennessee, coming up the Kaskaskia River, making settlements and as soon as other people joined them, pushing onward with the true pioneer spirit. About the same time but higher up the river, Bailey Riddle settled. He was from North Carolina. Jesse Fuller came from Virginia in the fall of 1833 and settled east of the river in the outskirts of the timber bordering what is now Humboldt. In 1834, came Henry and Hawkins Fuller and others. Fuller's Point neighborhood retains their name. The next were William and Jonathan Graham, the Ellises, William, Robert and Jackson Osbern, William Harrison Smith, the Hoskins and Jacob Hoots who came here from Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and Indiana. Because the Okaw bottoms were extremely unhealthful many settlers left after having the prevalent chills and ague, and no doubt this stopped immigration for a time to this immediate locality. The early settlers on the Okaw experienced more than the usual privations and hardships. The nearest mill was that of John Pervis, five or six miles south of the settlement and when the water was high enough to turn the wheel, the trails were impassable because of mud. Jesse Fuller opened a

mill, in 1836, across the river so the people had to cross the river to obtain a grinding, the ox teams swam and the grist was carried over in a canoe. In dry times, when the mills could not operate, the settlers had to go to Spangler's mill on the Sangamon near Springfield or to Baker and Norfolk's mill on the Ambraw. From the very first the church was present in the Okaw settlement, Reverend William Martin, a Regular Baptist, being their first minister. Once each month they held church in their homes. Their physician was Dr. Seth Montague who lived in Paradise Settlement.

The mail was carried through North Okaw Township from Charleston to Springfield along the old Springfield Trace by stage. A relay station was established at the home of Wm. Harrison Smith just south and east of where Cook's Mill now is. Mr. Smith was also the first Township Clerk when the county was organized. The first marriage in North Okaw occurred in 1836 when John Turner and Mathilda Simms were married. The first burials were made in 1835 and they were members of the Ellis family.

The winter of 1830 and '31 was one of unusual severity for Coles County pioneers. Snow fell continuously from the latter part of November until late in January, covering the ground to a depth of four feet. In February a warm spell melted this snow and a sudden freeze converted the country into a glare of ice, causing great hardship. A fair crop followed this winter and a few more settlers came and prosperity seemed on its way. Just now in 1832 came Black Hawk's last stand against the whites in the northwest part of the state and Governor Reynolds called for volunteers. Coles County furnished but few such men. Those who went were required to furnish their own guns, ammunition, horses and provisions until they arrived at the general meeting place. At this time they still had the old muster days when there was a general gathering of all the able bodied men at some point to drill. Later the day began to be regarded as one of general frolic and not of drill and so was abolished by the General Assembly.

A most remarkable phenomenon occurred on the night of November 12th, 1833; it was known as the Falling Stars.

Mr. Tremble, an early minister, gives an account of it. He was on his way home from a mill west of Shelbyville, twenty-six miles from his home at the Wabash Point Settlement, with an ox team. He spent the night at the home of a friend near Shelbyville, asking his host to awaken him at 3:00 o'clock in the morning so that he might have an early start. When he awoke he found his host and family very much excited over the appearance of the heavens. He stepped outside the door and saw all about him what appeared to be the stars of the Heavens falling to the earth. He said they did not seem to reach the earth but died out about the time they reached the top of his head. He tried to touch them but could not reach any. The family at whose home he was visiting, thought the end of the world had come and urged him to remain with them. He, however, thinking that he might as well be at his home at the Wabash Point Settlement or on the way there, as in this cabin, if the world did come to an end, yoked his oxen and started forth. As he went along the way, at every settlers house, the people seemed crazed with fright and were on their knees imploring mercy. As it grew daylight, the stars became dimmer and dimmer until at last he could not detect the falling stars any longer. He reached his home safely and lived to be an old man.

Another curious phenomenon occurred on December 20th, 1836. It was a sudden freeze. It had been a mild day, thawing, and raining, when about the middle of the afternoon, a heavy black cloud came from the northwest at the rate of twenty-five or thirty miles per hour, accompanied by a terrific roaring noise and as it passed, water, chickens, and little animals were frozen in its track, almost instantly.

The first post office for Paradise Township was located at the home of George Hanson in 1829. He named it in memory of Paradise Post Office in Virginia, where he was born. The post office remained here two years and then was moved up to the state road just then being opened, to the relay house kept by William Langston. The post office remained here two years and then was moved to Richmond, some times called Old Richmond, an embryo town a little to the west on the State Road, on the Houchin farm, where George W. Nabb kept a store. The post office remained here until the Terre

Haute & Alton Railway was completed and Mattoon founded. There is nothing now on the site of the settlement called Old Richmond and the owner of the land last summer in digging to construct a cistern dug into what he thinks was a grave of the old graveyard of the village, but the water came in so fast that he was unable to find out what was there. However he expects to drain it some day and excavate in that spot and see what old relics can be found. The location of Old Richmond was what is now about one-half mile west of the south end of the Long Lane southwest of Mattoon, on the State Road.

The first school of Paradise or Mattoon Townships was taught the winter of 1827 and '28. James Waddill being the first teacher. In 1831, John Houchin attempted to burn brick in the settlement and built a cabin for the hands. The project failed and the cabin was appropriated by the settlers for school purposes. It had long slab seats, puncheon floor and a writing desk along one side. It had a fireplace of mud and sticks and along one side of the room a log was taken out and greased paper put over the aperture, for lighting the room. The teacher was paid so much per scholar and he boarded around among the patrons. Before the building was occupied as a school, a man named Ledbetter appropriated it for his family. Soon after, George Hanson went to order him out. Ledbetter chased him off with an axe. Hanson stubbed his toe in his flight and fell and Ledbetter split the back of Hanson's coat open with the axe. It was not until 1845 that the first school house built especially for the purpose was opened in Mattoon Township, this was just at the time of the first permanent school laws coming into force. It is not stated that any horse mills for grinding grain were built in Mattoon Township as the older settlements all had them and the settlers in this vicinity traveled to them. Pioneer mail facilities in the county were indeed meager, letters were few and newspapers a rarity. Postage, governed by distance, ranged from five to twenty-five cents per letter.

The houses of the early settlers were very primitive. The chimney, at the end, was often five or six feet wide; on the inner side the crane was hung and cooking was done in various pots and kettles suspended from this crane. The floor was laid with split puncheons four to six feet long laid on

short round piles a few inches above the ground. Often times the cabin had only a hard tramped earth floor. A loft was often in the cabin gained by means of a ladder. The immigrants rarely brought an extensive outfit for housekeeping, if any, so they made their own furniture, the bed being a rude affair placed in one corner, and made by placing an upright post about four feet from one wall and six or seven feet from the other. Poles were laid from this upright pole to each wall and slats placed upon them. Dried prairie grass was often used for mattresses until feathers could be obtained. Under this bed was often a smaller one made that could be pulled out at night and it was called a "trundle-bed". Tables were rude and the chairs were three legged stools. Pegs were driven into the walls to hang clothing on. The young people of these early pioneers soon grew old enough to marry and set up new homes. All they received for presents were generally a few home-made household utensils, some good advice and perhaps a horse and saddle. They grew their own corn, potatoes, wheat and a few garden vegetables in a clearing in the woods since they had as yet no plow that would turn the tough prairie sod.

Eastern Illinois, in which lies Coles County, is truly the prairie district of the state and therefor settlement was developed slowly because few pioneers were brave enough to venture very far away from the timber. Along the more traveled trails from the Wabash River Settlements to those along the Illinois River, an occasional settler, more venturesome than the rest, built his cabin, but always where timber was near. An old record says that there was very little settlement upon this prairie until 1849 when there was a rush of immigration, in anticipation of the Douglas "Illinois Central Railroad" Bill, the discussion of which in Congress had attracted much attention to the Prairie Land of our state. At this time the largest settlements in Eastern Illinois were Danville, Paris, Blooming Grove and Decatur. In 1831, Coles County had only 31 voters but the beginning of the National or State Road in 1832 through this section, gave an impetus to immigration, attracting people from New York and Ohio especially. Other unfavorable conditions for colonization existed in this prairie section, at this time, namely: no mar-

kets for the agricultural products and therefore poor prices for them, so that by the end of this decade, 1840, there was a population in Coles County of only about Nine Thousand persons.

The heroic effort, patriotic zeal and religious fervor of our pioneers cannot be over estimated. No obstacle seemed too great, no task impossible of accomplishment. The history of the years following the pioneer period down to the present, is indeed filled with noble sacrifices and acts of christian courage, but they would have been of no avail in the task of rearing the noble structure which is our Coles County without this splendid foundation that was laid by our pioneer forefathers.